

DARFUR

Humanitarian Aid Held Hostage

The intensification of fighting and the general increase in insecurity in Darfur have forced Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to drastically reduce its activities over the last three months.

In the areas held by the Sudanese government, attacks by bandits/militias on MSF and other relief agencies have intensified in frequency and brutality. Since July 2006, death threats, beatings, sexual attacks and assassinations have been occurring alongside armed robberies in cities and on roads under governmental control. Access routes to the Jebel Marra in central Darfur have become so dangerous that MSF and other humanitarian agencies had to suspend all activities in that mountainous area. As a result, at least 100,000 people, including a large number of displaced persons are now deprived of assistance, while several cholera outbreaks have been reported and the number of war-wounded has increased. Other assistance missions have been suspended, as have other vital services, such as the transfer by road of patients requiring emergency surgery. However, MSF can still work in the large displaced persons' camps, which together house close to 2 million people who are almost entirely dependent on outside aid.

The Sudanese government bears grave responsibility for the mounting insecurity along roadways and in towns it controls. In the first place, such violent armed robberies could not possibly take place so regularly without the complicity – if only passive – of the regime's imposing security apparatus covering Darfur. Secondly, Khartoum has responded to United Nations' threats of military intervention with xenophobic propaganda, likening all foreigners to "new crusaders" motivated by hatred of Arabs and Islam – therefore, encouraging armed elements operating on the roads and generally drawn from nomadic clans to target relief workers. In all likelihood, the increased violence against humanitarian personnel results from a deliberate strategy by the government aimed at confining aid organizations to garrison towns (so that it can conduct its counter-insurgency campaign without hindrance or witnesses), but also at resisting the threat of international intervention by holding humanitarian workers hostage. "If you insist on wanting to send in the blue berets, you should know that it will be at the cost of several deaths amongst relief workers." – That is, in substance, the message being sent to the international community by the "bandits/militia" operating with the consent of the regime.

Outside the areas under Khartoum's control, fighting has resumed in western and northern Darfur. The hostilities pit supporters and opponents of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), which was signed on May 5, 2006 under strong international pressure by Khartoum and one rebel faction only. In the Korma and Tawilla regions, that rebel faction has killed more than 70 civilians. If the areas currently affected by fighting have so far been less dependent on international aid, the resumption of violence could produce many wounded, as well as new population displacements.

As of today, it has been nearly impossible to conduct an independent needs assessment due to the lack of effective security guarantees. The splintering of the armed opposition into a dozen factions, frequently deprived of logistical networks and operational chains of command, requires aid organizations to negotiate with a growing number of armed groups whose territorial and military authority are uncertain and who are often more interested in looting aid resources than in the establishment of relief operations.

Retrospective mortality surveys tend to indicate that the war has left at least 200,000 dead by the end of last year, one-quarter to one-third of whom have been assassinated. This horrendous death toll appears directly linked to the brutality of Khartoum's counterinsurgency campaign - not to the implementation of a secret program of systematic extermination of part of the Darfurian population. From a purely legal perspective, the atrocities committed in

Darfur may fall under the 1948 Genocide Convention. However, historically speaking, they are more akin to “pacification campaigns” carried out by European armies during periods of colonial conquests than to the methodical destruction of part of its citizens by the Rwandan state apparatus’ in 1994.

In the face of this renewed, widespread violence, the United States, Great Britain, France, the European Union, the African Union, the highest leadership in the United Nations and many Western advocacy groups assert that sending U.N. troops is the best way to assist the Darfur populations. According to U.N. Security Council Resolution 1706, approved on August 31, the 7,000 peace keepers currently deployed by the African Union are to be replaced by 20,000 blue helmets. The latter will be authorized to use force to implement their mandate, defined as ensuring compliance with the DPA, protecting displaced persons and international workers as well as disarming the belligerents.

Khartoum strongly refuses to accept this deployment. At this stage, implementing resolution 1706 requires declaring war on Sudan and invading its western province. Of course, no nation appears ready to take that on. And, assuming that the Sudanese government ultimately agrees to accept U.N. troops, no country is currently willing, either, to provide the 20,000-person force that Resolution 1706 calls for. Nearly 80,000 blue helmets are already deployed around the world and the U.N. is struggling to find an additional 15,000 soldiers to strengthen UNIFIL contingents in southern Lebanon.

Furthermore, with the resumption of fighting and the opposition of many armed groups to the U.N.’s deployment (or the DPA), it is difficult to imagine how the blue helmets would carry out their mission. As deputy U.N. secretary-general for peacekeeping Jean-Marie Guehenno emphasized on October 4, “when you try to apply peacekeeping to any kind of situation and confuse peace keeping with peace enforcement, you run very quickly into great difficulties (...). Who tells me that a half million square kilometres can be policed, that law and order can be imposed by an outside force is wrong.” States are well aware of that and balk at providing troops to a U.N. mission they have mandated.

Despite its own doubts, the international community continues to promise the people of Darfur that their salvation will come from a U.N. military intervention, whose chances of deployment and success are currently slim. And yet, some humanitarian actors, like Jan Egeland, U.N. deputy secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, are participating in this interventionist campaign. Thus, they are also implicating aid organizations in the “just war” camp and exposing them further to reprisals by Khartoum and its militias.

The neutrality required to intervene in a war zone prohibits aid workers from making judgments about the recourse to force or from speaking out on the international pressure that could prompt warring parties to respect the requirements of international humanitarian law. Yet, it remains that the international community’s current strategy, while failing to stem the resumption of violence against civilians, is definitely contributing to the endangerment of the vital aid operations that more than one out of three Darfurians depend on. This observation is not, of course, intended to exonerate the warring parties from their primary responsibilities. They alone can ensure that the lives of non-combatants are respected and that humanitarian agencies can provide impartial assistance to the victims of the conflict.

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